

Miscellanea

Xerxes' hubris and Darius in Aeschylus' Persae

Aeschylus' *Persae* is the only extant Greek tragedy which addresses not a myth from the distant past but a fairly recent historical event. The defeat of the Persians at Salamis took place just eight years before the production of the play in 472 BC. Although *Persae* is often considered a simple tragedy, lacking in subtlety compared to Aeschylus' later work, especially the *Oresteia*, no convincing answer has yet been given to the problem of the precise nature of Xerxes' *hubris*. The most epigrammatic, as well as convincing definition of the concept of *hubris* has been presented by E.R. Dodds: "arrogance in word or deed or even thought".¹⁾ *Hubris* is clearly connected with excess and sometimes occurs in circumstances in which a mortal forgets the limitations of his status and seeks to compete with or even equal the gods; that is the reason why the gods are particularly interested in punishing hubristic attitudes. Generally speaking, *hubris* can be considered an attitude contrary to the spirit of the Delphic Oracle's pronouncements.²⁾

Since Xerxes took personal command of the army he headed, he is clearly responsible up to a certain extent for its defeat. *Persae* culminates in his much-awaited arrival and it is he whom the elders blame in the exodus for the disaster which has hit Persia. More importantly, Xerxes does not deny their accusations. Throughout the play it is constantly stressed that the Greek victory was the result of divine intervention,³⁾ and Darius makes clear Xerxes' *hubris* by saying that he

¹⁾ Dodds 1951, 31. Fisher (1992, 1 ff.), on the other hand, thinks that the concept should be associated with specific acts or activities and appears rather reluctant to accept its connection with attitudes or thoughts in general. He does, however, admit that in the case of certain reflective or philosophical texts *hubris* may denote the drive or the desire to engage in an offensive behavior. I believe that the concept of *hubris* in *Persae* is more connected with thoughts than any specific acts.

²⁾ This is W. Schadewaldt's (1970, 400) opinion.

³⁾ Murray (1940, 125) sustains that the first secret of this tragedy is that Aeschylus preserves the emotion that the Greeks' deliverance was the work of god from beginning to end.

offends the gods with his arrogance (θεοβλαβούνθ' ὑπερκόμπωι θράσει, 831).⁴⁾ What Darius never clarifies is what exactly the *hubris* of his son was.

As far as I know, only three scholars have tried to answer this question: Conacher maintains that the real offence of Xerxes was the crossing from Asia to Greece against the ordinance of Zeus,⁵⁾ while Hall suggests that his real *hubris* was the desecration of Greek holy places, which assaulted the honor of both the gods and the Greeks.⁶⁾ On the other hand, Fisher defines Xerxes' *hubris* as "the growth to action of his desire to add Greece to the empire, and of his determination to use any means, including attacks to the honour of the gods, in pursuit of that aim". These attacks, according to Fisher, include the assault on the Hellespont and the Greek holy places.⁷⁾ Conacher's claim originates from Darius' observation that Zeus granted the honor of governing the whole of Asia to only one man (762-4). However, this does not necessarily imply that Zeus has forbidden Asia's monarchs to cross the natural boundary of the Hellespont and conquer Greece. The bridging of the Hellespont by Xerxes is rather considered as a *sign* of his misdemeanor and not as a crime *per se*. As far as Hall's suggestion is concerned, the desecration of the altars and the temples is primarily a work of Xerxes' army, not Xerxes' himself, although, as we will see, this does not completely absolve him of the responsibility for this defilement. The same objections more or less apply to Fisher's contention. Moreover, I do not think that any imperialistic intention can be classified as *hubris*. My answer to the question of Xerxes' *hubris* is connected to the reason why he undertook the expedition in the first place.⁸⁾

In order to answer this last question let us start from Atossa's dream. It is commonly held that dreams in Greek tragedy reveal not only the will of the gods but also the innermost fears and motives of the characters presented on stage. In his mother's dream Xerxes tears his robes because he is embarrassed in front of his

⁴⁾ I use West's text from the Teubner edition. Translations are my own.

⁵⁾ Conacher 1974, 164.

⁶⁾ Hall 1996 *ad* 808.

⁷⁾ Fisher 1992, 260-1.

⁸⁾ I must state from the outset that much of my analysis will be devoted to an attempt to reconstruct the psychology and the unstated motivations of the characters, especially Xerxes. I believe that such an enterprise is legitimized by the often allusive (as well as elusive) character of Aeschylean tragedy. I am convinced, contrary to the contention shared by many critics, that it is right to attribute motives to characters in drama, even when they do not express them directly. Such a restriction can only be destructive for a creative literary criticism and fails to do justice to the particular nature and quality of Greek tragedy. Many times a critic *has* to apply approaches that may even seem unconventional to the majority of his colleagues, in order to provide answers to certain philological problems that remain unresolved.

father, who witnesses his fall (197-9). Xerxes' tearing of his robes is mentioned three more times (468, 834-36 and 1030). In each case the cause of Xerxes' reaction is attributed to the woes he faces, apparently due to the defeat his army has suffered (cf. *κακῶν* ... *βάθος*, 465; *κακῶν ὑπ' ἄλγους*, 835; and *ἐπὶ συμφορᾷ κακοῦ*, 1030). This reason does not exclude a more personal justification. I suggest that after the announcement of Atossa's ominous dream the dramatist intends us to view this repeatedly reported and most significant action as an expression of Xerxes' desperation at his failure to emulate his father. As the queen informs us, the most important reason for Xerxes undertaking the whole expedition was the unfavourable comparison with his father made by his counsellors, who accused him of unmanliness for failing to increase his paternal wealth by waging war (753-8). Darius represents for Xerxes a standard which he wishes not only to live up to but also to surpass and that is probably the reason why he chooses Greece as the place he wants to conquer, given that Darius' forces failed to occupy the country. This is something mentioned—implicitly or explicitly—three times in the play (236, 244 and 475).⁹⁾ Darius' idealized portrait is sketched by the chorus *after* the announcement of not just Xerxes' defeat, but of the magnitude of his loss. It is then that the elders totally forget about Darius' misfortune at Athens and characterize him as the invincible king (855).

Xerxes, then, clearly wanted to succeed where his father had failed. The purpose of his expedition was not to add to the empire's resources. The multiple references to Persia's existent wealth and abundance of gold¹⁰⁾ rather discourage us from thinking that this was his main motive.¹¹⁾ More emphasis should be given to his mother's statement that Xerxes will be admired should he succeed (*θαυμάσιος*, 212). In order to gratify this ambition not only did he gather a huge army from practically all of Persia's subordinate kingdoms but also take personal command of the expedition. In this way he became responsible for its outcome (550-4 and 924). Had he assigned it to one of his commanders, he would still be in a position to reap the fruits of a possible victory himself and, in the opposite case, not to be held guilty of the failure. His personal involvement reveals his intense wish to win a victory that will be considered entirely his own and that will make him glorious.

During his expedition he totally destroyed the city of Athens, something which is only hinted at in lines 348-9; but it is also something of which Aeschylus'

⁹⁾ I believe that the requital for the defeat at Marathon which Xerxes, according to his mother, expected to exact (473-7) must be viewed as the pretext, not the real cause of his expedition.

¹⁰⁾ On the notion of wealth in the play see Anderson 1972, 170-1.

¹¹⁾ Consequently, I disagree with Winnington-Ingram (1973, 217), who considers the lust to add to wealth one of the causes of disaster. A similarly mistaken notion is supported by Gagarin (1976, 45), Thalmann (1980, 277), Michelini (1982, 151) and Hall (1996, 16).

audience was well aware. Xerxes' ambition, however, was to obtain a complete victory over the foes who defeated his father's troops. He wanted a triumph. This is a vital part of his *hubris*, because to this aim he devotes all of Asia's military forces. The magnitude of his force puffs up his confidence and pride and makes him certain that the outcome of the expedition will definitely be favorable for him. When the numerical superiority of the Persian ships is revealed, Atossa rightly thinks that her son is proud of that (πλήθει καταυχήσας νεῶν, 352). Xerxes himself states that the defeat was totally unexpected (910). More importantly, the chorus characterizes Xerxes as 'equal to god' (ἰσόθεος, 80) after having mentioned the enormity of the military forces he leads. I do not think that it is far-fetched to suppose that Xerxes, basing himself on the power of his vast army and navy, *does* feel equal to the gods, a feeling dangerous in itself, as every Greek knew. This assumption fits well with the chorus' subsequent forebodings about the 'cunning deception of the god' and of *atē* (93-100), as well as with Darius' observation on the blossoming of *hubris* and the harvest of *atē* (821-2). Indeed it is Xerxes' confidence and pride in the size of his army, as well as his desire for a triumph, that leads him to some very important strategic errors that result in his defeat.

After having heard the Greek's false report about his opponents' intention to flee during the night before the battle, he uses the whole of his navy to prevent their supposed flight. This mistake is vital, judging from the length of the messenger's narration of this incident (353-83). In this particular part of the narrative the word *πᾶς* abounds.¹²⁾ Xerxes ordered all of his admirals (πᾶσιν... ναυάρχους, 363) to guard the passageways leading out to open sea and threatened to behead all of them if they failed (πᾶσιν στέρεσθαι κρατὸς ἥν προκείμενον, 371); every single sailor and every single man who was master of his weapons embarked (πᾶς ἄνθρωπος κώπης ἄναξ / εἰς ναῦν ἐχώρει πᾶς θ' ὅπλων ἐπιστάτης, 378-9); and all night long (καὶ πάννυχτοι δὴ) the ships' captains kept the entire naval force moving (διάπλοον καθίστασαν / ναῶν ἄνακτες πάντα ναυτικὸν λεών, 382-3).¹³⁾ In his wish for a complete victory and for the total destruction of his enemies Xerxes engages the entire fleet in a mission that will inevitably weaken his army's strength, while he could have held back reserves. This is what a moderate leader would have done in his place. Not only that but his thirst for a triumph is so great that he assigns to the

¹²⁾ The use of the word *πᾶς* and its compounds in the play is noticed by Avery (1964, 173-5). Avery, however, thinks that by this device Aeschylus achieved an emphasis on the totality of the Persian defeat and wanted to stress that the whole Persian empire was committed to the assault on Greece, something which made it seem that the contest was equally vital for both sides. On the major theme of the *πλήθος* see Michelini 1982, 86-97.

¹³⁾ Bakewell (1998) is right in maintaining that Hall's arguments for making the Greeks the subjects of ll. 374-83 are not persuasive.

strongest, most noble and trusty Persians the task of butchering the Greeks who would take refuge on the small island of Psyttaleia (441-54). These two strategic mistakes are linked by the messenger's comment that Xerxes failed to estimate what the future had in store for him and by references to the gods (cf. οὐ γὰρ τὸ μέλλον ἐκ θεῶν ἠπίστατο, 373 and κακῶς τὸ μέλλον ἱστορῶν. ὥς γὰρ θεός κτλ., 454).

That the use of the totality of the Persian naval force to prevent the supposed flight of the Greeks was a terrible error is underlined by the application of the word *πᾶς* to the conditions that now favor the victory of the Greeks: the day covers the whole earth (*πᾶσαν* ... *γαίαν*, 387), the sung cry of the Greeks fills all the barbarians (*πᾶσι βαρβάροις*, 391) with terror, the trumpet fires the whole fleet with its sound (*πάντ' ἐκεῖν' ἐπέφλεγεν*, 395), the Greeks all pull together quickly (*θοῶς δὲ πάντες ἦσαν*, 398), the whole fleet comes out against the barbarians (*ὁ πᾶς στόλος / ἐπεξεχώρει*, 400-1) and their struggle now is on behalf of all (*νῦν ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀγών*, 405). The messenger, however, does not state directly that the nocturnal enterprise weakened the Persian fleet, probably because he did not want to offend his king in any way. He does say that 'at first the flood of the Persian army put up a resistance' (412-3), implying that the fleet was not able to withstand the assault for a long time due to its fatigue. Furthermore, whereas during the night each ship encouraged the other (380), during the battle their communication was disrupted, since they could not bring assistance to one another (414). That the engagement of the best part of the Persian army to destroy the Greek survivors in Psyttaleia was a mistake is indicated by the fact that the messenger considers their death to be a suffering of at least double the magnitude of the previous woes he told of (435-7). Ironically, the Persians on Psyttaleia are killed by the bow (460-1), which is considered to be the emblem of their army (148, 239 and 278). In this case, the Greeks are somewhat assimilated to the barbarian invaders by the inarticulate cry they utter, which resembles the clamor of the Persians just before the battle at sea (cf. 462 to 406). By killing all of the Persians in that little island the Greeks partly become barbarians themselves, a notion which is reinforced by the use of the verb *κρεοκοποῦσι* (463).

Despite these two calamities Xerxes does not give up on his attempt to conquer Greece. 'Convinced by empty hopes' (*κενήσιν ἐλπίσιν πεπεισμένος*, 804), as the ghost of Darius informs us, he leaves behind selected troops. These troops destroy the temples of the gods and the altars (809-12), an impiety for which they will be punished. However, the destruction of the Persian army at Plataea is not exclusively its own fault. Its leader Xerxes is also responsible, since he imposed no restrictions on his soldiers. Their arrogance reflects his. We are left to infer from the text that Xerxes is so proud and confident of the vast army he has gathered that he utters no prayers to the gods and that he does not make sacrifices to them before the decisive battle of Salamis, whereas the Greeks' battle clamor makes an explicit

reference to them (404). In all probability, then, the *hubris* of Xerxes which led to his fall was also his greed for a total triumph over the Greeks no matter what. In order to achieve this goal he did not hesitate to use every means. It has rightly been observed that the bridging of the Hellespont itself, of which Xerxes is accused by his father, is not the essence of the Persian king's *hubris*, but rather a symbol of it.¹⁴ His decision to transport to Greece a vast army necessitated this choice. His most significant error of judgment was that he 'emptied the whole continent of its men' (718). It is precisely this that the ghost of Darius characterizes as a foolish enterprise (πεῖραν τήνδ' ἐμώρῳεν, 719). It is the engagement of the military forces of the whole of Asia that troubles the hearts of the elders and leads them to predict disaster (8-12). For this same reason the queen is filled with fear and states that 'the masses would not respect wealth in the absence of men' (166). This is also the cause of the chorus' prediction that the inhabitants of Asia will no longer abide under Persian rule and that people will now talk freely (584-97).¹⁵

Xerxes, Darius tells us, does not remember his injunctions, something which the old king attributes to his son's youth (782-3). Indeed, Darius initiated many campaigns with a large army, but he never caused such a great catastrophe to the city (780-1). The chorus mentions that he did not even leave his hearth (867). Darius' injunctions to his son, then, must have included the suggestion not to use the totality of the empire's military resources to one single effort and not to neglect the affairs of the state by his absence. Xerxes' absence from the palace is considered as dangerous and fearsome by his mother (168-9). The oracles Darius received evidently concerned the defeat of the Persian army in Greece due to the *hubris* of the soldiers and their king, as well as the punishment of both of them; Darius even knows about Xerxes' rags. However, he did not inform his son about them because he thought that their fulfillment would come after a long period of time (739-41).

Enormous expeditions carry the risk of enormous losses, a prospect which Xerxes did not even contemplate. In trying to surpass his father and to become the most glorious of the Persian kings Xerxes became responsible for the deaths of many people. 'Know it well', says the messenger, 'never in a single day has such a large number of men died' (431-2). 'Know it well, contemporaries of mine', says Darius, 'none of us, who have yielded this power, would ever have seemed responsible for so many woes' (784-6). The woes that Xerxes caused to his country are also stressed by the multiple references made to the domestic misery due to the soldiers' absence (60-4, 117-25, 132-9, 537-45 and 579-83). The yoke of slavery

¹⁴ See Conacher 1974, 158 and Garvie 1999, 32.

¹⁵ Richardson (1952, 59) is right in maintaining that "the fear of στάσις, as the penalty of royal incompetence, represents a Greek viewpoint projected by Aeschylus into Persian mouths".

which Xerxes wishes to cast over Greece (ζυγὸν . . . δούλιον, 50) leaves the Persian women alone under the yoke of marriage (λείπεται μονόζυξ, 139).

Consequently, Darius' function in the play is not restricted to that of a foil to Xerxes.¹⁶ More importantly, his dominance in the third part of the tragedy is a hint of the reason for Xerxes' failure; in his wish to surpass his father the new king was more vulnerable to *atê* than his predecessors because he conceived the idea of engaging the whole of Persia's military force in one conquest. His thirst for a triumph led him to vital strategic mistakes that cost him the defeat and a personal humiliation. While Darius was characterized as τόξαρχος (556), Xerxes does not even carry his bow in the exodus. His limbs are weakened and he initially wishes to die in front of the elders (912 ff.), primarily because he is aware that their age permits them to compare him unfavorably with Darius, an assumption which is strengthened by the emphasis laid on the previous stasimon to the old king's achievements. Moreover, Xerxes in the exodus incites the chorus to lament not only the loss of the army, but also him personally (1046, 1056 and 1076), something which probably indicates that he considers himself pitiable because of his failure to prove himself a worthy son of his father. It is a subtle tragic irony that the alleged δαίμων of the Persians' destruction who took away Xerxes' wits (724–5) has the form of his dead father, who is also called a δαίμων (620, 634).

Μηδὲν ἄγαν and μέτρον ἄριστον were two proverbs that encapsulated the Greeks' philosophy and way of life especially in the fifth century BC. Their violation was often attributed to the impetuousness of youth. Despite the fact that at the time of the expedition Xerxes was more than forty years old, he is called young (744, 782). I suggest that by the sheer magnitude of the expedition he planned and by his greed for a complete triumph Xerxes transgressed this vital philosophic principle, something which made his fall—with the succor of the divine element—almost inevitable. These two factors, which denote excess, must be considered as the basis of his *hubris*. Conversely, it is implied that the reason for Darius' success, as well as of the other Persian kings who were distinguished for their good sense (767 and 772), was the observance of this principle.¹⁷

109 Maikina Str.
15771 Zografou, Athens, Greece
zachos28@yahoo.com

Loukas Papadimitropoulos

Received: December 2006; accepted: April 2007

¹⁶ See Broadhead 1960, xvii; Alexanderson 1967, 2; and Taplin 1977, 126.

¹⁷ This, I hope, answers well Garvie's (1999, 34) view that, even if we understand why Xerxes was wrong, the question of the chorus ('Why was Darius so successful?') is left unanswered.

I would like to thank *Mnemosyne's* anonymous referee for his/her helpful suggestions.

Bibliography

- Alexanderson, B. 1967. *Darius in the Persians*, *Eranos* 65, 1-11
- Anderson, M. 1972. *The Imagery of the Persians*, *G&R* 19, 166-74
- Avery, H.C. 1964. *Dramatic Devices in Aeschylus' Persians*, *AJPh* 85, 173-84
- Bakewell, G.W. 1998. *Persae 374-83: Persians, Greeks, and περσάρχῳ φρενί*, *CPh* 93, 232-7
- Broadhead, H.D. 1960. *The Persae of Aeschylus* (Cambridge)
- Conacher, D.J. 1974. *Aeschylus' Persae: A Literary Commentary*, in: Heller, J.L. (ed.) *Serta Turyniana* (Urbana), 143-68
- Dodds, E.R. 1951. *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley)
- Fisher, N.R.E. 1992. *Hybris. A Study in the Values of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greece* (Warminster)
- Gagarin, M. 1976. *Aeschylean Drama* (Berkeley)
- Garvie, A.F. 1999. *Text and Dramatic Interpretation in Persae*, *Lexis* 17, 21-40
- Hall, E. 1996. *Aeschylus Persians* (Warminster)
- Michellini, A.N. 1982. *Tradition and Dramatic Form in the Persians of Aeschylus* (Leiden)
- Murray, G. 1940. *Aeschylus the Creator of Tragedy* (Oxford)
- Richardson, L.J.D. 1952. *The Inner Conflict in the Persae. Athenian Dramatist and Persian Characters*, in: White, M.E. (ed.) *Studies in honour of Gilbert Norwood* (Toronto), 55-67
- Schadewaldt, W. 1970. *Hellas und Hesperien*, I (Zurich)
- Taplin, O. 1977. *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford)
- Thalmann, W.G. 1980. *Xerxes' Rags: Some Problems in Aeschylus' Persians*, *AJPh* 101, 260-82
- Winnington-Ingram, R.P. 1973. *Zeus in the Persae*, *JHS* 93, 210-9

Copyright of *Mnemosyne* is the property of Brill Academic Publishers and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.